

UNIT FOUR: Nicaea and its Legacy

Introductory reading:

Chadwick, chapters 31-35, 44; Kelly IX, X 5-6

1. Archetypal heresy

G.L. Prestige's celebrated Bampton Lectures, which he entitled *Fathers and Heretics* (1940), were known by generations of undergraduates studying patristics as *Dads and Cads*. Arius, a presbyter born c. 280 in Alexandria, came to be seen by the Church as the archetypal cad. 'Arianism', the doctrine that was associated with his name, even though he himself was of little significance in the years that followed the Council of Nicaea in 325, came to be regarded as the archetypal heresy.

Perhaps this image of the heresy is hardly surprising given its historical context. The crisis of the fourth century was the most dramatic internal struggle that the Church had so far experienced. It generated the first creedal statements to claim universal and unconditional assent. It became inextricably linked with the question of the authority of the Christian emperor in the affairs of the Church. Later it would become similarly entangled with the divisions between Roman and Barbarian in what had been the western empire. Rome was sacked by the Goths in 410 and they had adopted 'Arianism' as a non-imperial version of the Christian faith. There were tensions between Arian rulers and the Catholic Roman officials whom they still relied on to administer their conquered territories. By time that these great upheavals in the western empire were over 'Arianism' had been irrevocably cast as the 'Other' in relation to Catholic (and civilized) religion. Arius himself came more and more to be regarded as a kind of Anti-Christ among heretics, a man whose superficial austerity and spirituality cloaked a diabolical malice and a deliberate enmity to the revealed faith. In the early medieval period he is represented alongside Judas in ecclesiastical art. Earlier accounts of the way he died recall the account of the death of Judas in Acts. No other heretic has been so demonized. As we shall see however, the focus of recent scholarship has moved away from Arius as the originating heresiarch to a greater interest in the later phases of the controversy that he provoked. In such revisionary treatments of the controversy the theology of the fourth century no longer revolves around him.

2. Arius and the story so far

We have traced the history of Christology from the New Testament to the writings of Origen. It begins with the tension present in the New Testament between devotion to Christ and an inherited and instinctive monotheism. Christianity moves within the horizons of Hellenism and its concern with ontology and the ultimate structure of reality. The first theologians have to give reasons for what they believe to persuade the

trained minds now arrayed against them. They have to define the boundaries of what the Church believes in response to Gnostic systems articulated in scriptural language. Justin and Irenaeus respond by narrating a comprehensive vision of salvation history. Irenaeus tells this single story in his response, the story of Christ the new Adam, his doctrine of recapitulation. Justin tells this story as part of a Logos Christology which makes Christ at once the principle of creation and all revelation. Origen takes up this Logos Christology and relates it to the Platonic problem of the relation of the one and the many. He makes the Logos the mediator between the one and the many, placing Christ between God and the world.

But, as Basil Studer describes (1993: 96), the tension between devotion to Christ and monotheism, which was at the origins of Christology, intensifies. During the second century theologians clearly worked out the doctrine that God created the world out of nothing, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This forced a choice upon the exponents of Logos Christology that placed Christ between God and the world. Which side of the absolute divide that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* implies is the Logos on? Is the Logos through whom all things are made on the divine side with the creator and on the other side with the created world?

Thus for Lewis Ayres (2004: 20) controversy over Arius was the spark that ignited a fire waiting to happen. Probably in the year 318, in Alexandria, this fire was ignited by a controversy between a priest named Arius and his bishop Alexander.

3. The Christology of Arius

This controversy concerned the relationship between God the Father and the Son or Word. Alexander taught that the Son, although 'between created and uncreated', was always with the Father, and eternally generated from the Father. Arius objected, emphasizing that there was only one God, the Father, and the Son existed by the will of the Father from 'before all ages' but not eternally and without sharing the Father's being. Alexander places the Son with the Father on one side of the divide between God and creation opened by the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Arius places him on the other side with creation.

Arius argued that the Word could not be co-eternal with the Father because the Word, by definition, had a source and the Father did not. The fundamental premise of his theology is his affirmation of the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God, the 'unoriginate source' of all reality. So the profession of faith, which Arius and eleven supporters presented to Bishop Alexander (as reported in Athanasius' [*De synodiis* 2.16](#)), opens with the uncompromising statement,

...we acknowledge one God, who is alone ingenerate (self-existent), alone eternal, alone without beginning, alone true, alone possessing immortality, alone wise...

Since it is unique, transcendent, and invisible, the being or essence *ousia* of the Godhead cannot be shared or communicated. For God to impart his substance to some other being, however exalted, would imply that he is divisible and subject to change, which is inconceivable. Moreover, if any other being were to participate in the divine nature in any valid sense, there would be a duality of divine beings, whereas the Godhead is by definition unique. Therefore whatever else exists must have come into existence, not by any communication of God's being, but by an act of creation on his part. It must have been called into existence out of nothing. Thus Arius seems to resolve the tension between Christology and monotheism by making the Son of God God in name only.

4. Nicaea

After some initial meetings in Alexandria and elsewhere in 325 a council of about 220 bishops (almost all from the eastern half of the empire) met at the will of the first emperor to be baptized, Constantine at the city of Nicaea near his new capital of Constantinople to deal with a number of controversial issues including this dispute. It was the first council that came to be considered an 'ecumenical' or world council. The council issued a creed (which is not identical with our present 'Nicene creed' of 381), modeled on the professions of faith recited by candidates for baptism. This creed said that the Son was generated 'from the essence of the Father' and was hence *homoousios* (the same thing or being or essence) with the Father. Thus the council sought to secure apostolic tradition with a conceptual innovation. The word *homoousios* was both untraditional and unscriptural. This creed also condemned anyone who said that the Son was from an *ousia* or *hypostasis* other than that of the Father. Arius was condemned and exiled.

The council of Nicaea is treated in many textbooks as a decisive moment and a basic decision by the Church about its faith. After that crucial event, all who disagree with Nicaea's insistence that the Son is one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father could only be considered heretics. But, as Lewis Ayres (2002) has recently shown, that is not how people saw it at the time. The idea that Nicaea was a fundamental turning point only developed gradually over the decades that followed, for two reasons. Firstly, the idea that a creed with fixed wording might serve as a universal standard of belief had not yet developed. The council made an *ad hoc* decision, and it stated its faith in terms that clearly differentiated its beliefs from those of Arius. But nobody at Nicaea assumed that this particular wording would stand as the fundamental Christian confession for centuries to come. Local creeds continued to be used for teaching converts and children until the next century. (One of the best examples is the 'Apostles' Creed', which originated as the local creed of the Roman church.) The Council of Nicaea was well known (because of its size and association with the emperor Constantine), but no one regarded its confession as a universal marker of orthodoxy. At that point in history, no creed was treated that way.

Secondly, the controversy between Arius and his bishop Alexander was, as we have seen, the spark that ignited a fire that was waiting to happen, a much wider conflict between different ways of interpreting what the Scriptures said about the Father and the Son. The wider conflict continued for decades. It was not that the fourth century was the period when 'Jesus became God.' Christians considered Jesus to be divine already. But they differed over what *God* meant. Many assumed that there could be degrees of God: Christ was God but not the one God, the Father (such people often appealed to 1 Tim. 6:16).

5. The emergence of pro-Nicene theology

5.1 A new cast of opponents

Arius played a key part in the events that led up to the Council of Nicaea but he did not have a role in the controversies that raged between 325 and 381. After the council, Arius was readmitted to communion by many bishops after he placated them with a somewhat bland confession of faith. Then, in 337, he died.

Here are the main players in the controversy that flared up in the years after Nicaea.

Marcellus of Ancyra

One of the most important leaders at Nicaea itself, but one who had strongly unitarian tendencies, emphasizing the closeness between Father and Son and the Son's sharing of the Father's being.

Athanasius

Bishop of Alexandria from 328, in 336 and 339 Athanasius was exiled for maladministration, including charges that he had been violent towards his opponents. Some who had also opposed his predecessor Alexander were delighted to remove one of their theological opponents. Athanasius' exile was not purely a matter of theology, but he hoped to present the conflict that way. In a rhetorical masterstroke, he presented his enemies as 'Arians' rather than 'Christians.' Many western theologians accepted his terminology, and later on some easterners did, too.

The Eusebians

A large group of eastern bishops stood in a broad tradition that encompassed both Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote church history and in praise of Constantine, and the less well-known Eusebius of Nicomedia. They insisted that there is a basic ontological distinction between Father and Son. But they insisted just as strongly that there is an ineffable closeness between Father and Son, such that the Son's being can be said to be

from the Father in some indescribable sense, and that the Son is 'the exact image of the Father's substance' (cf. Wisd. 7:25-26; Heb. 1:3). Such theologians found Athanasius's insistence that the Son is the 'proper wisdom of the Father' too unitarian. Comparing the relationship between the Son and the Father to the relationship between a human person and his or her was too simplistic they felt. In such a picture God was truly one, but was the Word of God really distinct from God the Father? Arius himself may be considered a slightly idiosyncratic 'Eusebian,' but others who belonged to this tradition were in no way dependent on Arius, and they knew little of his particular theology.

Heterophobia

During the 350's the controversy shifted considerably. This was partly because of Emperor Constantius, and partly because new 'Heterousian' theologies emerged.

Constantius was the most successful of Constantine's three sons, and during a complex civil war between 350-353 he came to control the whole empire. Constantius was a strong opponent of Athanasius whom he considered a danger to the unity of his realm. He strongly supported a group of 'Eusebian' leaders who strongly opposed Marcellus's theology and distinguished clearly and hierarchically between Father and Son. Scholars now term this theology Homoian. Homoians argued that the Son is 'like' (in Greek, *homoios*) the Father, although a distinct and inferior being. Homoians rejected any use of the term 'being' or 'essence' (*ousia*), saying it was unscriptural and implied that God was materially divided in generating the Son.

The most radical of those who opposed the theology of Marcellus represented by Aetius and his disciple Eunomius) insisted that Father and Son were unlike in being. Their teaching provoked a strong reaction and seems to have affected public perception of the Homoian movement. During the 370s and 380s Eunomians or Heterousians (*heteros* = other; *ousia* = being) increasingly became a distinct church group. (In older accounts they are referred to as 'extreme Arians' or 'neo-Arians.')

One of their Homoian associates, Eudoxius, became bishop of Antioch from 357 and promoted Aetius, alienating many who would previously have been in broad agreement with a 'Eusebian' theology.

One group who strongly opposed the Homoian radicals and the Homoian attempt to prevent the use of essence language focused for a while around Basil of Ancyra (who had replaced Marcellus in that bishopric). They described the Son as 'like the Father according to essence' and were known as Homoiousians (*homoios* = like). Many people sympathized with their approach because they seemed to uphold 'Eusebian' principles. They believed it was necessary to talk about essence or being in order to preserve and emphasize the unique closeness between Father and Son. Homoiousians taught that the Son was from the Father in a unique sense: His essence differed from the Father's only in not being unbegotten. The language of 'likeness in essence' thus seemed to uphold the balance they desired in theology.

The Homoiousian approach was very different from that of the Heterousian theologians, who could describe the Son as a creation: unique indeed, but still a created product of the divine will. During the 350s, these tensions among the 'Eusebians' could not easily be contained.

The emperor strikes back

In 359 and 360 Constantius called two councils that, under pressure from him, promulgated a Homoian creed. This was of immense importance. Before Constantius's councils, the wording of the Nicene Creed was becoming an increasingly important point of reference for some, but there was still no history of a creed functioning as a universal marker of Christian identity. But by the councils of 359 and 360, Constantius and his advisors had come to see the logical end of the gradual increase in the use of creeds over the previous 20 years. Forcing provincial councils and individual bishops to agree to one creed seemed an obvious way to ensure uniformity.

In the face of this policy, only one creed – the Nicene – could stand as a clear alternative. Between 360 and 380, the policies of Constantius and the rise of Heterousian theologies prompted a variety of groups to coalesce around the Nicene Creed as a standard of faith. Scholars now call these theologians pro-Nicene. This coalescing of the different groups was made possible in part by the death of Constantius in 361. His sudden death and the antipathy of his successor Julian 'the Apostate' towards Christianity meant that the Homoian creed never had the chance to establish itself.

5.2 The mystery of the Three in One

This rapprochement between previously opposing groups involved a slow and often difficult negotiation towards a shared sense of the core faith for which they agreed Nicaea would be the symbol. The theologies of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus are, as we shall see, three key examples of pro-Nicene theologies. So are the western theologies of Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo, and the theologies of the later Athanasius, Didymus the Blind and Cyril of Alexandria.

Two key themes united pro-Nicene theologians. First, and most important, pro-Nicenes agreed that God's being was not divided, and that the persons of the Godhead were truly distinct from each other. Pro-Nicenes were prepared to accept a wide variety of terms for unity and distinction in God: what mattered was that God was indivisibly one and yet irreducibly three. How this was so was a mystery. In this context it seemed much more possible to say that Father and Son were of one 'essence' or 'being' without implying that God was material or that Father and Son were 'parts' of God.

This sense of the incomprehensible divine unity and distinction provided the context in which to understand the earlier Nicene insistence that the Son was eternally begotten by the Father. It was also the context in which they understood what it meant for the

Spirit to proceed eternally from the Father and Son. These decades saw pro-Nicenes clearly state that the Spirit was one with the Father and Son against those who still maintained earlier beliefs that the Spirit was subordinate to Father and Son (often understood as the greatest of the angels).

An important corollary of the divine unity was the doctrine of inseparable operation: all three persons are present in each and every divine action. While we easily attribute particular roles to each person, calling the Spirit 'sanctifier' or the Son 'redeemer,' Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine showed how Scripture encourages speaking of the persons in this way because of the weakness of human intellects: we must realize that Scripture also reveals that in the divine unity God, Word and Spirit all sanctify.

Second, pro-Nicenes emphasized that human persons would always fail to comprehend God and that one could only way to ascend towards greater knowledge and love of God was through discipline and practices that would reshape the imagination. Increasingly, pro-Nicenes emphasized the importance of the purification of both soul and body as a precondition for attention to the divine mystery. The fallen mind has lost its natural attention to God and become obsessed with material imagery.

This sense that the human intellect needed to be purified was the context for their understanding of Scripture as a divinely revealed and always trustworthy resource for the Christian imagination. Scripture resulted from a divine act of love: God spoke in human words, but of realities that lie beyond human comprehension. Recognition and exploration of the mystery at the heart of Christian faith is at the heart of pro-Nicene theology.

5.3 To Constantinople

In 381 the rapprochement of the previous two decades resulted, through the help of the pro-Nicene emperor Theodosius, in the Second Ecumenical Council, that of Constantinople. This Council promulgated a revised version of Nicaea's creed that Christians still use today. The Council added clauses on the Spirit to insist that 'with the Father and Son He is worshipped and glorified.' Groups of non-Nicene Christians continued to be a real force within the Christian world, but increasingly they became distinct and isolated ecclesial groups. 'Homoian' theology survived among many of the German tribes who came to rule over the western half of the empire, but in the centuries that followed even they came to accept the Nicene faith.

6. Becoming *theos* in Jesus

Rowan Williams (1979: 50ff) identifies what was at stake in the controversy between Athanasius and Arius. He observes that what is missing in Arius' Christology is a sense, present in the writings of Origen, of salvation as an entry into the divine life, the divine society, 'becoming *theos* in Jesus.' Thus, in his writings against those he identified as 'Arians' Athanasius repeatedly asks how the Arian Logos can save, how he can truly

reconcile creation with God when he is himself a creature. His argument is sometimes reduced to the point that, if salvation is a participation in God (*theosis* or 'deification', cf. 2 Pet. 1:4), the Word cannot deify if he is not God (Athanasius, *On the Councils of Arminium and Seleucia* 51). The soteriology of deification rests on two christological premises: on faith in the true divinity of the Word, and on faith in his true Incarnation. In order to be able to save mankind Christ had to be consubstantial with the Father as well as with man. 'Deification' for Origen and Athanasius and their successors did not mean sharing in the divine 'substance, a quasi-physical participation, but in enjoying the divine relation of the Son to the Father, sharing the divine life. Unless the relation of Father and Son is something eternally true of God, this relation of sonship to God cannot be realized. The 'Arians' seem to have held that God could release men and women from sin simply by fiat. But Athanasius restates an Irenaeus's position to argue that salvation by word alone remains no more than an external assurance: grace does not become internal to human existence, and human history becomes a dreary succession of sin and absolution. The human world is not transformed, grace is not 'joined to the body.' The Son has not only to live a human life, but also to die a human death, since without this, death would remain an area untouched and untransfigured by God and we should never become inheritors of immortality and incorruption (*Orations against the Arians* II. 68-69).

The Texts

The texts are the two letters of Arius in which he states his Christology, taken from Stevenson (*op. cit.*), the creeds of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, and an extract from Athanasius, *Against the Arians* III 29-34, in which he speaks of deification.

Further Reading

Anatalios, K. *Athanasius*, London: Routledge, 2005.

Ayres, L. *The Legacy of Nicaea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Behr, J. *The Nicene Faith*, two volumes, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004.

Grillmeier, A. *Christ in Christian Tradition* I, London: Mowbrays, 1975, pp. 308-328

Hanson, R.P.C. *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988.

Russell, N. *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Studer, B. *Trinity and Incarnation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993, chapters 8, 9, 10, 13.

Williams R.D. *The Wound of Knowledge*, London: DLT, 1979/1990, chapter 3.

____. *Arius*, 2nd Edition, London: SCM, 2001.

Questions for consideration

- What does Arius teach about Christ? How does it relate to earlier Christology?
- What was the response of the Council of Nicaea?
- Who are the main players and parties in the controversy that flares up after Nicaea?
- What united pro-Nicene theologians?
- What does 'deification' mean for Athanasius?